

# *Ghosts*

An Essay by Lord Dunsany

Source: Dunsany; Schweitzer, Darrell; and Kirk, Tim. *The Ghosts of the Heavside Layer, and Other Fantasms*. Philadelphia: Owlswick Press, 1980. Print. 139-145.



Among serious students of wireless there have been several minor discoveries lately; by-products, as it were, of their researches. By serious students I need hardly say I do not mean merely those who listen to music or jazz from their wireless set every evening, and know how to get their favourite station without interference from Luxembourg. I mean rather those whose investigations lie in between stations, and whose information comes from what we should call *atmospherics*. Among these it has been increasingly noted that there are many kinds of ghosts; the wood-ghost, for instance, who never comes indoors at all, seldom leaving the darker places of woods, and at no time coming nearer to any house than a shrubbery, unless there be a keeper's house in the very wood itself, in which case specimens of the wood-ghost have been found as near as the washing. And then there is the stone-ghost, who only haunts ruins and who never meets the timber-ghost at all, whose home is in dark old corridors, preferably of oak. Never, did I say? Well, sometimes perhaps: my reader may occasionally have heard a shrill



and peculiarly gruesome scream in the night, piercing if rather faint, a quavering scream that has the effect of chilling the blood more completely than falling into a wet ditch in winter: it is the timber-ghost meeting the stone-ghost. But this is exceptional, and I wander somewhat from my theme, for the researches of the wireless students, the real students, all tend to show that these various groups of ghosts keep entirely separate. That is not to say that a belated traveller may not come on all three, if they should all be driven afield by some special occasion.

One of these occasions is undoubtedly Christmas. It has not yet been definitely ascertained, with that degree of certainty that is demanded by scientists, what it is that impels ghosts to wander so much about Christmas-time. But the source of their activity at this time is usually supposed to be a certain contentment or, as it may seem to them, smugness, among human beings; among living humanity, that is to say. I do not accept the word smugness myself, nor even the alternative word self-satisfaction, but various causes raise the level of human happiness about this time and there is no doubt that ghosts are jealous, or at any rate emulative. I do not myself care much for scientific statement unaccompanied by experiment or example, and I am fortunately able to point to just the example I need to support this statement about ghostly emulation: take for instance a cold bright day when you dance and clap your hands to keep warm; your shadow does the same. It is precisely the same with human revelries and the ghosts; when there are dances among bodily people, and games and crackers and all



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kinds of noisy merriment, the ghosts become active too. And if we can look at it impartially, forgetting for a moment our prejudice against the supernatural, one can hardly blame them. The remedy is obvious: nobody is going to tolerate them; you are not asked to do that; cold and clammy spectres with a leer in their eye-sockets, and their whole attitude indicating doom, appeal to nobody; the remedy is to keep as much as possible to the middle of brightly lighted rooms, away from the shadows of large cupboards or nooks or corners, and never going near the wrong side of curtains. The timber-ghost will always stay in his dark corridors, unless tempted out by such foolhardiness as no reader of a reputable paper would contemplate. The stone-ghost, strictly speaking, has no regular method of egress from the ruins in which he houses himself; but moonlight slanting through an oriel window, particularly if it has that yellow tinge that for ghostly purposes makes it almost solid, provides an easy path for the ghost to walk out, after which he may go anywhere. As for the wood-ghost, his roads are innumerable. Any shadow of a tree, if it be dark enough, is a sufficient path for him; that is why, if shrubberies come too near to a house, I like to see a good clear space between them and the nearest wood. I have forgotten to mention the marsh-ghost: he seldom walks upon the ground at all, or, if he does walk on it, goes stumblingly. He rides on a white mist; slowly, but with extreme comfort; any reader who has observed one of these mists coming up at evening out of the marshes, and has noticed the direction it takes and the pace at which it goes, can easily dodge one of these ghosts. For those whose business has not given them



leisure to study this matter much, my advice is not to walk near marshes after sunset at any of those times of the year when ghosts are to be apprehended, or at other times whenever there may be that warning look in the sky that, however meteorologists may describe it, seems to us like a sinister wink. To warn my reader particularly against the marsh-ghost is hardly necessary when one has once pointed out that he is a near relation of the will-o'-the-wisp, whose deadly plausibility is surely a byword. To get among that class of ghost is soon to know willow-goblins, and, not long after that, to be food for efts.

It is not much to recommend that for the short period of the Christmas holidays one should keep away from ruins, dark corridors, and woods and marshes at evening. My readers will surely find that they are the better for it.

Much more is known of these ghosts than I have said, my reason for not saying more being the source of the information; and this source is no other than overheard conversations. That is what the wireless students have been doing for the last two or three years. Some will take one view of it, and some another, and will act according to their lights; but, whichever view they take, everyone will be chary of making too much play with the overheard conversation of ghosts. It is a game that two can play at; and the trouble is that, with these people, it is like playing chess against a master. If you eavesdrop among men you can prevent retaliation by never saying a word yourself when there are listeners within hearing. But in the case of ghosts, the timber-ghost in particular, how ever can you be sure of that? Not knowing where he is, you only know where he may be, nor has his range of hearing been



ever scientifically tested.

In between Barcelona and Strasbourg, in the narrowest chink between city and city, wireless has heard all manner of wandering voices; but if you pass on what I have told you, far worse if you discuss it openly, you are only inviting retaliation by those whose specialty is eavesdropping. In cornices, in curtains, behind pianos and (heaven help you) I know not where else, lurk some who, knowing nought of our sense of fair play, and caring no more for it than they do for us, may be bandying your most secret thoughts amongst their frivolous company, and holding up your opinions to the derision of those that, with far less purpose than bats, drift up and down through eternity.

